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The Case Against Critical Terrorism Studies Revisited

Strategic Paper No 17

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Introduction

The editors of the respected peer-reviewed journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism* describe Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) as primarily “a research orientation that is willing to challenge dominant knowledge and understandings of terrorism, is sensitive to the politics of labelling in the terrorism field, is transparent about its own values and political standpoints, adheres to a set of responsible research ethics, and is committed to a broadly defined notion of emancipation”.¹ It perhaps cannot be overstated that a key contribution of CTS has been to remind all and sundry that the “terrorism scholar can try to be as independently minded as possible and test for the robustness of findings based on different definition of the data, but the basic problem – that terrorism studies is ineluctably political – remains”.² Hence it should be acknowledged at the outset that without a doubt CTS has raised scholarly awareness of the importance of understanding and unpacking how Mainstream Terrorism Studies (MTS) scholars define important terms like for instance, “terrorism” and “extremism”, the extent to which they employ scholarly rigor in employing such concepts and essentially how objectively – that is, free from undue state interference for instance – they are able to conduct their research. Hence CTS, because of its strong normative commitments, can certainly help keep MTS “honest”, so to speak, while offering a series of “labels and narratives” that “could provide a more flexible and ethically responsible alternative to the oppressive confines of the discourse of “Islamic Terrorism”” that has dominated MTS scholarship in the more than two decades following the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States and the ensuing Global War on Terror.³

This paper seeks to employ the CTS method to an extent in unpacking CTS itself. In revisiting the key contours of CTS as a disciplinary field, it asks the basic question of whether CTS does indeed offer a genuinely alternative paradigm to MTS. It does so in three main steps. First, the paper examines the inextricable rootedness of CTS in the wider Critical Security Studies discipline, before tracing the ways in which CTS is said to offer an alternative perspective to MTS. The paper then interrogates the extent to which the assertion is valid, before concluding with an assessment as to how best to consider CTS in relation to MTS. But first, as mentioned, it is important to examine how CTS is itself an inescapable outgrowth of wider Critical Security Studies.

Critical Terrorism Studies as an Outgrowth of Critical Security Studies

With Karl Marx as a dominant background influence and inspiration, Critical Theorists essentially argue that a primary goal of scholarship is to uncover and help overcome the often hidden social structures through which ordinary people are said to be dominated and oppressed.⁴ At the core

1 Marie Breen Smyth et al., “Critical Terrorism Studies: An Introduction,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2008), p. 2.

2 John Horgan & Michael J. Boyle, “A Case Against ‘Critical Terrorism Studies,’” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 1, no. 1 (April 2008), p. 52.

3 Richard Jackson, “Constructing Enemies: ‘Islamic Terrorism’ in Political and Academic Discourse,” *Government and Opposition*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2007), p. 426.

4 David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (London: Polity Press, 1989).

of Critical Security Studies (CSS) therefore are the concepts of human security and emancipation, developed by Copenhagen, Welsh, Paris, and Frankfurt School scholars, promoting a “decolonial” approach to CSS as well.⁵ In essence, CSS draws attention to how security threats, rather than representing objective realities, are instead “socially constructed” to form a dominant “security discourse” – particularly by powerful state structures and elites. Consequently, rather than continuing to regard security as simply meaning the political sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state, it is more important, as a normative goal, to reconceptualize security to give more attention to how threats, even those that emanate from the state itself, could impact the welfare of religious, ethnic, and other marginalized groups, and individual human beings.

Flowing from this normative orientation, CSS draws the attention of scholars to the importance of identity politics, the various dimensions of human security and ultimately, the key objective of emancipation. The roots of CTS lie in this broad conception of CSS, with Robert Cox’s distinction between state-driven, top-down problem-solving and Critical Theory insights playing an influential role in the development of the basic CTS orientation.⁶ That is, the problem-solving approach focuses on “prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organized [...] as the given framework for action”, while the Critical Theory modality “calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing”.⁷ CTS, as an outgrowth of CSS, therefore, sees itself as a “movement that draws from a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches” associated with CSS, such as “post-structuralism, postmodernism, Critical Theory, feminism, post-colonial theory, and discourse analysis just to name the most prominent”.⁸ Leading CTS scholars like Jackson have identified the core components which constitute CTS, including the notable claim that CTS analyses represent “both a theoretical commitment and a political orientation”.⁹

The Politics of Knowledge Production

In line with the core beliefs of CSS, CTS scholars assume first and foremost that knowledge is “always for someone and for some purpose” and that “regimes of truth” lead to certain narratives being established in a way that excludes alternative explanations.¹⁰ In other words, there is always a dominant, if not immediately obvious, political-ideological discourse that serves the interests of

5 Ibid.; Christopher S. Browning & Matt McDonald, “The Future of Critical Security Studies: Ethics and the Politics of Security,” *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2011), pp. 235-255.

6 Robert Cox’s works have been influential in shaping the development of Critical Security Studies, which has in turn shaped the development of Critical Terrorism Studies. See: Keith Krause & Michael C. Williams (eds.), *Critical Security Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 121-146.

7 Robert Cox cited in: Torsten Michel & Anthony Richards, “False Dawns or New Horizons? Further Issues and Challenges for Critical Terrorism Studies,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2009), p. 400.

8 Ibid.

9 Richard Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies,” *European Political Science*, vol. 6 (2007), pp. 244-251.

10 Ibid., p. 246.



a power elite, pervading society in a myriad of unrecognized ways and which also infuses society's scholarly attitudes and research output. Exposing the workings of such a socially constructed dominant security discourse in the domain of terrorism studies requires rejecting mainstream understandings of knowledge about terrorism, and furthering instead the notion of the “basic insecurity of all knowledge” and by extension, “the impossibility of neutral or objective knowledge about terrorism”.¹¹ As Jackson notes:

The purpose of such [CTS] research is not simply descriptive nor is it to establish the ‘correct’ or ‘real truth’ of terrorism; rather, its aim is to destabilise dominant interpretations and demonstrate the inherently contested and political nature of the discourse – to reveal the politics behind seemingly neutral knowledge.¹²

CTS scholars, therefore, have sought to depart from “the unnecessarily restrictive yet pervasive conception of terrorism employed in the mainstream debates.”¹³

The State Itself as Implicated/Perpetrator

A key way in which CTS has sought to move away from the “restrictive yet pervasive conception of terrorism” as supposedly articulated by MTS scholars is by broadening the understanding of terrorism, in a way reminiscent of how the Copenhagen and Welsh schools of CSS broadened the field of security studies.¹⁴ In the CTS case, this broadening primarily resulted in the extension of the definition of terrorism beyond non-state actors carrying out violence against civilians. Scholars such as Halliday in this vein have used the term “terrorism from above” to characterise what is understood by CTS scholars as state terrorism.¹⁵ As such, CTS scholars seek to include state terrorism in scholarly research, with Jarvis, for example, arguing that this normative consideration effectively offers a “more consistent or honest understanding of terrorism.”¹⁶ Additionally, in broadening the scope of terrorism research to include state actors, CTS tends to display a certain ontological antipathy towards the utility of the term “terrorism”. This is because it is seen that the “‘terrorism’ label” in reality, has always been “a pejorative rather than analytical term and that to use the term is a powerful form of labelling that implies a political judgement about the legitimacy of actors and their actions”.¹⁷ Again harking back to its CSS roots, CTS scholars like Jackson aver that terrorism is “fundamentally a social fact rather than a brute fact”; whose “wider cultural-political meaning is decided by

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., pp. 246-247.

13 Lee Jarvis, “The Spaces and Faces of Critical Terrorism Studies,” *Security Dialogue*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2009), p. 16.

14 Ibid.

15 Fred Halliday cited in: Ibid.

16 Ibid., p. 17.

17 Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 247.

social agreement and inter-subjective practices”.¹⁸ Other scholars such as Blakeley adopt a slightly different tack, arguing that CTS scholars do not dispute the definitions of terrorism as much as the application of these definitions.¹⁹ Hence Blakeley suggests that CTS goes beyond merely reworking the definitions of terrorism, to rather creating a new research agenda that fully incorporates the reality of state terrorism as a legitimate subject of enquiry. By shedding light on state terrorism, CTS scholars contribute to the broader CSS-inspired project of human emancipation (discussed below), by challenging the power elites of society (i.e. the state) who deliberately invoke the “terrorist” label to designate certain out-group actors as security threats for political-instrumental reasons.²⁰

The Use of Alternative, Critical-Theoretical Methodological Approaches

Moreover, CTS research seeks to include “post-positivist and non-IR-based methods and approaches” into research on terrorism, decisively moving away from what CTS scholars term as the “materialist, rationalist and positivist approaches” dominant in social science and MTS research.²¹ Again, CTS derives this critique of a so-called positivist conception of terrorism studies – and the broader social sciences – from Critical Theory.²² To this end, CTS scholars seek to understand and explore “terror’s constructions, representations and performances” so as to be able to address both the analytical and normative limitations of the MTS literature.²³ By adopting such critical-theoretical approaches, CTS is said to open up previously underexplored spaces for additional questions and research agendas that had been previously closed off by the dominant positivist and rationalist perspectives dominant in MTS research. Again, Jackson notes that “this stance is more than methodological; it is also political in the sense that it does not treat one model of social science as if it were the sole bearer of legitimacy”.²⁴ This alternative approach of CTS scholars thus seeks to shed light on other lesser-acknowledged explanations and understanding of events that may be excluded by MTS scholarship.

Furthermore, CTS scholars draw attention to the negative real-world consequences of using what they call “problematic language” in the study of terrorism.²⁵ Jarvis argues that by focusing on “other readings of terror, other responses to terror and, ultimately, other ways of life,” this approach of CTS scholars offers alternatives to the supposedly two-dimensional, analytically and conceptually bland, “ameliorative, problem-solving role” of MTS research.²⁶ One outcome of the CTS drive to adopt

18 Ibid.

19 Ruth Blakeley, “The Elephant in the Room: A Response to John Horgan and Michael J. Boyle,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2008), pp. 151-165.

20 Ibid.

21 Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 247.

22 Michel & Richards, “False Dawns or New Horizons? Further Issues and Challenges for Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 412.

23 Jarvis, “The Spaces and Faces of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 18.

24 Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 247.

25 Jarvis, “The Spaces and Faces of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 20.

26 Ibid.



alternative critical-theoretical methodologies in addressing the supposed shortcomings of MTS “problem-solving” research, is to better interrogate the oft-hidden underlying contexts leading to terrorism.²⁷ CTS scholars thus seek to draw attention to the wider socio-cultural contexts which lead to the emergence of terrorism, including incorporating a broader gendered discussion along with non-Eurocentric viewpoints.²⁸ Hence CTS seeks to strengthen the understanding of the “important historical, social, political and discursive conditions through which terrorism emerges as an identity, problem or threat”.²⁹

Emancipation

A final core attribute of CTS that is directly an outgrowth of its roots in CSS/Critical Theory is the former’s normative-ideological commitment to the notion of human emancipation. Ken Booth’s understanding of emancipation as “the theory and practice of inventing humanity, with a view of freeing people, as individuals and collectivities, from contingent and structural oppressions”, is a conceptualization embraced by CTS scholars.³⁰ Put differently, emancipation in the CTS context is understood as “the realisation of greater human freedom and human potential and improvements in individual and social actualisation and well-being”.³¹ In other words, as McDonald elaborates, the CTS normative commitment to emancipation focuses on empowering individuals and groups that are marginalized or silenced,³² thereby seeking to “provide a space for emancipatory rationality”.³³ In this respect, Jackson makes the important admission that “CTS is determined to go beyond critique and deconstruction and deliberately work to bring about positive social change – in part through an active engagement with the political process and the power holders in society”.³⁴ In short, Jackson underscores that CTS is “both a theoretical commitment and a political orientation”.³⁵

From the standpoint of theory, CTS “engages in permanent critical exploration of the ontology, epistemology and praxis of terrorism studies and counter-terrorism practice, and seeks ultimately to introduce alternative interpretations and understandings into an established field of discourse”.³⁶ From a political/ideological vantage point, Jackson adds that CTS “is committed to an ethical

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p.18.

30 Harmonie Toros & Jeroen Gunning, “Exploring a Critical Theory Approach to Terrorism Studies,” in: Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth & Jeroen Gunning (eds.), *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 99.

31 Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 249.

32 Matt McDonald, “Emancipation and Critical Terrorism Studies,” in: Jackson, Smyth & Gunning (eds.), pp. 109-123. For more on McDonald’s views on emancipation in CTS, see: Matt McDonald, “Emancipation and Critical Terrorism Studies,” *European Political Science*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2009), pp. 252-259.

33 Michel & Richards, “False Dawns or New Horizons? Further Issues and Challenges for Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 406.

34 Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 249.

35 Ibid., p. 250.

36 Ibid.

reflexivity in relation to its own knowledge practices”, and adopts a critical, continually questioning stance “in relation to the broader field”, along with “an emancipatory politics” with respect to “praxeological questions raised by counter-terrorism policy”.³⁷

Unpacking the CTS “Alternative” to Mainstream Terrorism Studies (MTS)

To recapitulate the argument thus far: CTS can be regarded as “more of an orientation or critical perspective that seeks to maintain a certain distance from prevailing ideologies and orthodoxies” associated with MTS.³⁸ In addition, CTS sees itself as offering an arguably more persuasive and useful alternative to MTS because of “a core set of epistemological, ontological and ethical-normative commitments” that arise both as an outgrowth of its rootedness in Critical Theory and Critical Security Studies – but also as a response to the limitations of MTS.³⁹

A first general critique that CTS scholars make of MTS is the latter’s supposed lack of methodological and conceptual rigor, which has contributed to “the failure of terrorism studies to progress to the level of a mature, explanatory framework of knowledge”.⁴⁰ Overall, there are a number of criticisms that drive CTS scholars’ rejection of traditional terrorism studies or MTS – primarily based on the “state-centric, problem-solving perspectives that have thus far dominated terrorism research.”⁴¹ Firstly, CTS scholars critique the lack of sufficient primary research and data used in terrorism research. Based on such observations, CTS scholars argue that “local context and history” are ignored in terrorism studies discourse, with terrorism treated as a generalisable concept.⁴² In addition, scholars have also criticised the descriptive nature of mainstream research, the tendency to treat terrorism as a new phenomenon emerging after 9/11 and hence forsaking historicity.⁴³ CTS scholars further argue that the state-centric, problem-solving approach of MTS produces narratives and discourses that are largely not supported by empirical evidence and hence lead to “a cabal of virulent myths and half-truths whose reach extends even to the most learned and experienced”.⁴⁴

Second, CTS scholars identify a problem in the MTS “state-centric” perspective, arguing that this “state bias” – with scholars studying terrorism exclusively from the state’s perspective – affects

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 246.

39 Ibid.

40 Jarvis. See also: Andrew Silke, “The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2001), pp. 1-14; Andrew Silke, “An Introduction to Terrorism Research,” in: Andrew Silke (ed.), *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-29.

41 Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth & Jeroen Gunning, “Critical Terrorism Studies: Framing a New Research Agenda,” in: Jackson, Smyth & Gunning (eds.), p. 233.

42 Jeroen Gunning, “A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?,” *Government and Opposition*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2007), pp. 363-393.

43 Andrew Silke, “The Road Less Travelled: Trends in Terrorism Research,” in: Silke (ed.), pp. 186-213.

44 Silke, “An introduction to Terrorism Research,” p. 20; also see: Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies.”



the resulting scholarship.⁴⁵ CTS scholars in this regard note that traditional terrorism studies has its theoretical roots in orthodox security studies and counter-insurgency studies.⁴⁶ In this sense, for CTS scholars, MTS produces research that resembles “counterinsurgency masquerading as political science”.⁴⁷ This problem is at times associated with the lack of funding for independent research for this subject, with the majority of researchers being associated with governmental or government-funded bodies. A significant consequence of the state-centric approach, for CTS scholars, is the neglect of the state itself as a perpetrator of terrorism, and the policy-centric focus of terrorism research. Blakeley argues that state terrorism has been left out of major terrorism databases – such as the one developed by the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at St Andrew’s University and RAND Corporation.⁴⁸ Moreover, she claims that very little research focuses on states as perpetrators of terrorism – highlighting not only the state-centric approach of traditional research, but also problems with the definition of terrorism, which ignores state terrorism. CTS, for instance, calls out terrorism scholars for deliberately ignoring terrorist acts perpetrated by liberal democratic states.⁴⁹ CTS scholars argue that because “labelling acts as terrorism promotes condemnation of the actors involved,” the existing definitions of terrorism reflect a potential “political or ideological bias”.⁵⁰

Third, from the perspective of the CTS scholars, MTS adopts a narrow “problem-solving” or “traditional” approach. Such an approach is understood to not question terrorism studies’ “framework of reference, its categories, its origins or the power relations that enable the production of these categories”.⁵¹ As such, CTS perceives traditional research to be “ahistorical”, ignorant of “social and historical contexts”, and thus failing to understand the underlying dynamics behind terrorist acts.⁵² This MTS approach is argued to be “positivist and objectivist” and seeking to “explain the ‘terrorist other’ from within state-centric paradigms rather than to understand the ‘other’ inter-subjectively using interpretative or ethnographic methods”.⁵³ In other words, CTS scholars criticise MTS scholars for creating dichotomies when it comes to the use of violence by different actors – legitimising state violence while delegitimising violence by non-state actors. Turk’s comment that “efforts to understand terrorism have generally been incidental or secondary to efforts to control it” characterizes the critique made by CTS scholars in regard to MTS scholarship.⁵⁴

45 Gunning, “A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?,” pp. 368, 374.

46 Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 245

47 Gunning, “A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?,” p. 368.

48 Blakeley, “The Elephant in the Room: A Response to John Horgan and Michael J. Boyle,” p. 154.

49 Ibid., p.157.

50 Ibid., p.155.

51 Gunning, “A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?,” p. 371.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Austin Turk, “Sociology of Terrorism,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2004), p. 280.

This criticism then extends to a fourth problem – the MTS focus on national rather than human security – with CTS scholars arguing that traditional scholars take “security to mean the security of the state rather than that of human beings, on the assumption that the former implies the latter, and sees security in narrow military or law-and-order terms, as opposed to the wider conception of human security, as for instance developed by critical security studies”.⁵⁵ Moreover, MTS is criticised for viewing interests as “fixed” and regarding “those opposed to the status quo as the problem, without considering whether the status quo is part of the problem and transformation of both sides is necessary for its solution”.⁵⁶

Fifth, CTS scholars also critique the supposed ongoing MTS quest for the definition of “terrorism”. CTS scholars argue that “terrorism studies remains largely committed to removing terrorism from the realm of subjectivity and coherently, consensually, even objectively, defining this behaviour”.⁵⁷ Moreover, the criticism of the supposed MTS quest for the correct definition of terrorism is complemented by a critique of the MTS tendency to look for causations – for instance, between religion and terrorist acts – and for effective responses to terrorism. As a consequence, terrorism is “very rarely approached as anything other than a fully formed, extra-discursive object of knowledge”, with CTS scholars criticising the treatment of terrorism “not as social construction, performance or representation, but, rather, as an objective entity that is given, not made.”⁵⁸ Therefore, in the view of CTS scholars, terrorism studies of the MTS kind offers very limited space for the study of the historical and social processes that underlie terrorist acts. In this sense, the terrorism studies literature is perceived to have “key analytical and normative limitations”.⁵⁹

For CTS scholars, the normative and analytical limitations – a consequence of the aforementioned seeming weaknesses of MTS research – result in a narrow field of potential research topics while also promoting conformity to popular discourses and methods.⁶⁰ For CTS scholars, these limitations necessitate the need for a critical perspective to study terrorism.

But is CTS Really an Alternative to Mainstream Terrorism Studies (MTS)?

In this section, we shall interrogate the assumption that CTS presents a distinct alternative to MTS. In this respect, seven points can be made.

First, what seems clear from the outset certainly is that in the wake of the global war on terror, especially in the aftermath of the Al Qaeda strikes on New York and Washington in September 2001,

55 Gunning, “A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?,” p. 371.

56 Ibid., p.372.

57 Jarvis, “The Spaces and Faces of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 8.

58 Ibid., p. 14

59 Ibid., p. 15

60 Jackson, “The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies,” pp. 245-246.



scholarly research on terrorism studies as a whole gained increased salience. During this time, it should be noted, it was not just MTS, but CTS that also emerged as a scholarly sub-field. Hence just as is the case with MTS, CTS is “very much tied to 9/11 and the global and scholarly responses to it”.⁶¹ CTS, in other words, remains arguably very much part of the very post-9/11 terrorism research paradigm of which MTS finds itself.

Second, the CTS claim, derived from the wider CSS critique of mainstream security studies, that MTS tends to ignore the reality that there is always a dominant, if not immediately obvious, political-ideological discourse that pervades one’s scholarly attitudes and research output, is frankly, somewhat overstated. Traditional scholarship, which includes MTS, has long been cognizant of the need for self-awareness of implicit political and ideological biases and to make the effort to ensure the research process is not unduly influenced by them. After all, George Orwell long ago in 1946 declared that no writing “is genuinely free from political bias”, and that the desire to nudge the world in a certain direction exists in all writers.⁶² The English historian GR Elton likewise counseled that good scholars must “constantly regard their own preconceptions in order to minimize the effects these might have” and that one should avoid the temptation to “sculpt” the available data rather than “derive from it”.⁶³ MTS scholars in short, like all serious scholars, have long been trained to be mindful of their inherent subjectivity.

Third, as noted above, CTS scholars argue that MTS seems fixated on seeking out the proper definition of terrorism and in the process, “terrorism studies remains largely committed to removing terrorism from the realm of subjectivity and coherently, consensually, even objectively, defining this behaviour”.⁶⁴ More than that, MTS is said to be focused on the issue of causations – for instance, between religion and terrorist acts – and for effective responses to terrorism. Hence MTS essentially approaches terrorism as a “fully formed, extra-discursive object of knowledge”, rather than as a “social construction, performance or representation”.⁶⁵ While it is true that MTS does tend to approach terrorism as a “fully formed, extra-discursive object of knowledge” rather than a mere “social construction”, there are sound philosophical – and practical reasons – for doing so.⁶⁶ Francis Fukuyama has thus strongly criticized the various forms of Critical Theory for helping create a “cognitive wasteland” that impairs the effective application of reason to solving real-world social problems, insisting that there *is* an “objective reality outside the human mind, which human

61 Rabea Khan, “Race, Coloniality and the Post 9/11 Counter-discourse: Critical Terrorism Studies and the Reproduction of the Islam-Terrorism discourse,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2021), p. 498.

62 George Orwell, *Why I Write* (London: Renard Press, 2021 [1946]).

63 Geoffrey Elton, *The Practice of History* (London: Fontana Press, 1967).

64 Jarvis, “The Spaces and Faces of Critical Terrorism Studies,” p. 8.

65 *Ibid.*, p.14.

66 There have been many criticisms of the postmodernist and related critical theory insistence on radical subjectivity by scholars from both the natural and social sciences. See for instance: Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Viking Books, 1999); Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 2003); James Lindsay & Helen Pluckrose, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender and Identity – And Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020).

beings can gradually understand and ultimately come to manipulate”.⁶⁷ Fukuyama concedes that the various institutions of contemporary society such as, *inter alia*, the courts, mass media and academic journals, are not always “foolproof” and are “capable of bias”, but this does not *ipso facto* imply, as the entire Critical Theory/CSS/CTS project appears to do, that such institutions are “deliberately engineered by the elites who oversee them to disempower or manipulate ordinary people”.⁶⁸ He argues persuasively that modern liberal societies need to agree on a “hierarchy of factual truths” generated by their key institutions, or else they cannot function optimally.⁶⁹

It should also be noted that the MTS approach is much more nuanced than CTS gives it credit for. Hence it is probably more accurate to say that MTS is keen on excavating the various understandings of terrorism rather than seeking out the one correct understanding, especially how these play out within different geographical, political and cultural milieus. Jonathan Drummond in this regard has argued for a “culturally contextualised” approach to the study of terrorism, while Michael Stevens likewise suggests that since “terrorism and terrorists are found in a wide array of cultures”, it is important to “place manifestations and perpetrations of terrorism within specific cultural contexts” to guard against “stereotyped representations”.⁷⁰ MTS scholarship is also very careful about drawing simplistic causations between religion and terrorism. Southeast Asian MTS scholarship for instance takes pains to argue that rather than the religion of Islam itself, ideological permutations of *Islamism* offer a more accurate understanding of radicalization causation processes.⁷¹

Fourth, MTS scholars are not exactly unaware of the methodological challenges they encounter. Andrew Silke, for instance, whose own solid scholarship track record, is on balance, arguably closer to MTS, essentially agrees with the CTS critique on this score, conceding that “over 80 per cent of all research on ‘terrorism’ is based either solely or primarily on data gathered from books, journals, the media or media-derived databases, or other published documents”.⁷² Silke, who has a forensic psychology background, avers that “any examination not backed by direct examination of terrorists” basically amounts to “little more than idle speculation”.⁷³ Quite a number of MTS scholars have likewise “engaged in deeply critical examinations of the nature of sources, methods, and data in the study of terrorism”.⁷⁴ Again, the CTS critique of MTS on this score, it has to be said, seems overstated.

Fifth, CTS is wide off the mark in suggesting that MTS scholars engage in research that is “ahistorical” and that ignores “social and historical contexts”, thereby failing to understand the underlying

67 Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents* (London: Profile Books, 2022), pp. 85-86.

68 *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

69 *Ibid.*

70 Drummond & Stevens cited in: Kumar Ramakrishna, *Radical Pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalization in Indonesia* (Westport and London: Praeger Security International, 2009), pp. 10-11.

71 For instance, see: Kumar Ramakrishna, *Extremist Islam: Recognition and Response in Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

72 Silke, “An introduction to Terrorism Research”, p. 61.

73 Silke cited in: Ramakrishna, *Radical Pathways*, p. 12.

74 Horgan & Boyle, “A Case Against ‘Critical Terrorism Studies,’” p. 53.



dynamics behind terrorist acts.⁷⁵ In this vein, it is not fair to suggest that MTS uncritically regards “those opposed to the status quo as the problem, without considering whether the status quo is part of the problem” and its constructive “transformation” is necessary for its “solution.”⁷⁶ On the contrary, MTS is well aware of the critical need to examine the underlying social, political and economic conditions that impact human security – and that give rise to violent extremism and terrorism in the first place. Thus Silke has warned against an overly policy-perspective focus that hinders a more granular understanding of the underlying factors that drive terrorism.⁷⁷ Just as an example, MTS scholars based in Southeast Asia have *for years* discussed the need for short-term kinetic *counter-terrorist* approaches to be meshed with softer, longer-term *counter-terrorism* measures to deal comprehensively with underlying historical, social, economic and political conditions that fuel the terror threat in South and Southeast Asia.⁷⁸ Thus as the annual threat survey by a leading Singaporean terrorism studies publication argues:

“In general [...] the 2022 survey shows that much remains to be done to address structural grievances across the board. In Pakistan, for example, the ethnonationalist Baloch insurgency – whose “centre of gravity” has shifted from the Baloch tribes to the educated tech- and social media-savvy youth of the urban middle-class – is driven by “political marginalisation and socioeconomic deprivation”, resulting in a “more radical form of Baloch nationalism”.⁷⁹

The same publication also warned that in Southeast Asia itself, “frustrations over Mindanao’s lack of development, particularly in Marawi City – still yet to fully recover from the May-October 2017 conflict between the military and jihadist groups” – could still be exploited by “pro-IS threat groups” to “fuel recruitment” amongst “aggrieved local communities”.⁸⁰ In short, yet again, the CTS critique of MTS is well overstated. It also suggests, arguably, that CTS understanding of MTS scholarship is still somewhat Eurocentric and in need of significant broadening.

Sixth, while the CTS observation that MTS scholars often engage in research collaboration with and receive funding from the State is reasonable, this does not imply that MTS merely parrots State political and ideological agendas. That is way too simplistic a description of the relationship, which can be at times tense and marked by heated debates as well. Horgan and Boyle concur, clarifying that while, “within the broad community of self-ascribed terrorism ‘experts’ there are some charlatans who will do whatever they need to get close to power and to solve problems for them”, these “are not representative of the serious scholars in the field”, who, it must be said, “often work with the same

75 Gunning, “A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?,” p. 371.

76 Ibid., p. 372.

77 Silke, “The Devil You Know.”

78 Andrew Tan & Kumar Ramakrishna (eds.), *The New Terrorism: Anatomy, Trends and Counter-Strategies* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002).

79 Kumar Ramakrishna, “Global Threat Assessment 2022,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 15, no. 1 (January 2023), p. 9.

80 Ibid.

social, political and moral purpose of advancing social justice as CTS scholars”.⁸¹ Moreover, well-trained MTS scholars, like all scholars, are fully cognizant of how to interrogate information provided by state counter-terrorism agencies. They ought, as a rule, to know that they need to avoid “childlike trust” in such sources on the one hand, and “excessive scepticism” on the other, as both extremes spring, as GR Elton argued long ago, from the same problematic attitude of “insufficient thought”.⁸²

If anything, the relationship between MTS scholars and relevant state agencies *may not be close enough* to result in genuinely productive scholarship. Alex Schmid has pointed out that there are real institutional cultural differences between academics like MTS scholars on the one hand, and bureaucrats with access to classified information, on the other. As a sampling, while MTS academics “want to conduct thorough studies”, bureaucrats “want results at short notice”; and on top of that the “questions that interest academics are often not the same for which governments seek answers”.⁸³ Little wonder then that as Marc Sageman puts it:

“We have a system of terrorism research in which intelligence analysts know everything but understand nothing, while academics understand everything but know nothing. We need more productive interactions between the two communities”.⁸⁴

Seventh, CTS also overstates the degree to which MTS scholarship ignores states themselves as perpetrators of terrorism. While it may be true that generally speaking, for definitional reasons, state terrorism has been left out of major terrorism databases such as those associated with the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at St Andrew’s University and RAND Corporation,⁸⁵ this by no means implies that states are “let off the hook” by MTS. On the contrary, the role of the state itself in undermining human security and emancipation is well known, though the actual term “terrorism” may not always be proffered in the case of rogue states. JM Berger for instance, refers to state *oppression* rather than state *terrorism* in his own analysis of state-directed terror.⁸⁶ But more than that, MTS scholars, very often do call out states when they go too far. Again, as the aforementioned Singapore terrorism studies publication explicitly points out:

“In the Thai Deep South, ongoing instances of *wisaman khattakam*, a Thai term meaning ‘death at the hands of state officials who claim to have acted in the line of duty’, fomented Muslim discontent”.⁸⁷

81 Horgan & Boyle, “A Case Against ‘Critical Terrorism Studies,’” p. 54.

82 Elton, *The Practice of History*.

83 Alex P. Schmid, “Terrorism Research and Government,” *International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) Commentary* (18 April 2014).

84 Marc Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2014), pp. 565-580.

85 Blakeley, “The Elephant in the Room: A Response to John Horgan and Michael J. Boyle,” p.154.

86 John M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), pp. 104-106.

87 Ramakrishna, “Global Threat Assessment 2022,” p. 9.



The same publication also draws attention to the controversial role of the military junta in Myanmar in fanning violence against civilian populations in that conflict-wracked country since the coup of February 2021.⁸⁸

The Limitations of CTS and the Need for an Intellectual Rapprochement with MTS

It is worth reiterating at this juncture that by its very nature, CTS is inherently ideological. As a field it is significantly influenced, like CSS, by postmodernist theoretical attitudes of “a hermeneutics of suspicion” toward prevailing narratives and discourses.⁸⁹ Hence a key CTS scholar Richard Jackson himself talks of the need to have a “skeptical attitude toward accepted terrorism ‘knowledge’”.⁹⁰ Moreover, CTS scholarship is implicitly if not always explicitly geared towards a certain ideological/political activism as well, with its adherents apparently committed to exposing the “abuses of Northern democracies”, for instance.⁹¹ The point is, while a certain degree of scepticism is necessary for effective academic enquiry as discussed, it can be taken too far, *blurring the lines* between detached scholarship and an ideological/political *activism* with a view to effecting emancipatory change. In other words, there is always the danger that the apparent CTS preoccupation with ideological/political activism may inadvertently trump the academic rigor that its scholarship should be based on in the first place. This is where CTS faces *exactly* the same challenge as MTS and indeed all scholars. Again, as Orwell put it, no writing “is genuinely free from political bias”, and that the desire to push the world in a certain direction exists in all writers.⁹² Hence CTS, like MTS, must beware of implicit ideological biases that could undercut scholarly rigor.⁹³ Before we “speak truth to power,” in other words, *all of us* have to be very sure that what we have, as far as possible, is indeed “the truth”.

At the same time, the CTS fixation with an essential “hermeneutics of suspicion” toward MTS discourse is also relatively problematic. It could inadvertently transform terrorism studies into an insular and myopic, “self-conscious field of study, exclusively studying itself – its definitions, its concepts, its purpose and so forth”.⁹⁴ This would likely dilute the real-world policy and analysis utility of the discipline of terrorism studies. One implication of this would be to constrain the ability of the latter to offer dynamic, practical ideas and guidance to state practitioners having to deal with

88 Ibid.; see also: Benjamin Mok & Iftekharul Bashar, “Myanmar,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 15, no. 1 (January 2023), pp. 25-30.

89 This CTS stance, like that of CSS more generally, has been influenced by the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. See for instance: David Stewart, “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” *Journal of Literature and Theology*, vol. 3, no. 3 (November 1989), pp. 296-307.

90 Horgan & Boyle, “A Case Against ‘Critical Terrorism Studies,’” p. 53.

91 Ibid., p. 55.

92 Orwell, *Why I Write*.

93 For instance, See: Kumar Ramakrishna, “Operation Coldstore and the Perils of Academic Misinformation,” *The Straits Times*, 4/4/2018, accessed on 15/2/2024, at: <http://tinyurl.com/ye29xhhj>

94 Leonard Weinberg & William Eubank, “Problems with the Critical Studies Approach to the Problem of Terrorism,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2008), pp. 185-195.

rapidly evolving forms of terrorism and extremism on the ground across various national contexts. For example, as noted, CTS scholarship tends to argue that in MTS terms “security” is taken to “mean the security of the state rather than that of human beings, on the assumption that the former implies the latter, and sees security in narrow military or law-and-order terms, as opposed to the wider conception of human security, as for instance developed by critical security studies.”⁹⁵ This significantly oversimplifies the actual situation.

To illustrate, in Mindanao in the last two years, the Armed Forces of the Philippines have been defeating the extremist threat groups kinetically, with salutary effects on the domestic security situation overall. Kinetic victory by the state in this context has thus potentially strengthened the basis for human security and emancipation – assuming of course Manila seizes the opportunity to do so.⁹⁶ Here you need the state *before* you can secure genuine human security and emancipation. An excessive focus on a normative/ideological/political agenda that seeks to reflexively problematize the legitimacy of state action, including the use of force, could potentially circumscribe the policy measures needed to bring about the very goals CTS advocates push for. Moreover, as argued earlier, MTS scholars would not necessarily disagree with CTS assertions that a state-driven counter-terrorist response has always got to be judiciously meshed with political, social and economic initiatives that preserve human security and emancipation of endangered communities. Certainly in Southeast Asia, they have been saying this for at least two decades.⁹⁷

In the final analysis, perhaps the key contribution of CTS, as Horgan and Boyle noted years ago, is to remind MTS that the “terrorism scholar can try to be as independently minded as possible and test for the robustness of findings based on different definition of the data, but the basic problem – that terrorism studies is ineluctably political – remains”, and one should be always ready to acknowledge and correct for this.⁹⁸ Beyond that, however, it is hard to grasp the ways in which CTS can provide an alternative paradigm of terrorism studies to that offered by MTS. The distinctively alternative value proposition that CTS claims to offer is arguably not that stark. Importantly, as mentioned, it also seems reasonable to aver that CTS scholarship is currently overly limited by its focus on Western rather than other geographical contexts, as this essay, which has used Southeast Asian and other illustrations, suggests. It is hard to escape the conclusion therefore, that it makes more sense for CTS to position itself more modestly as an admittedly valuable and highly influential strain within MTS, rather than as an outright alternative to it.

95 Gunning, “A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?,” p. 371.

96 Kenneth Yeo, “Hungry and Tired: The Decline of Militancy in Mindanao,” *The Strategist*, 11/6/2021, accessed on 15/2/2024, at: <http://tinyurl.com/5xb873bs>

97 This theme comes out strongly in: Kumar Ramakrishna & See Seng Tan (eds.), *After Bali: The Threat of Terrorism in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies; World Scientific Publishing, 2003).

98 Horgan & Boyle, “A Case Against ‘Critical Terrorism Studies,’” p. 52.



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